

A Three-Cornered Fight

Tasks of American Revolutionaries in the Twenty-First Century

Coordinating Committee of Bring the Ruckus

December 1, 2003

[Note: The following was originally written as part I of the coordinating committee's annual report of Bring the Ruckus for 2003. It was written specifically for the purpose of initiating debate at our annual conference, held in January 2004 in Los Angeles. The ideas in this document were vigorously debated at the conference, but no consensus was settled on. As a result, this piece shouldn't be considered BTR's official line, but one interpretation, held by at least a portion of the BTR membership, of the present international and national context that we all find ourselves in.]

Bring the Ruckus has formed at a pivotal time in world history. The cold war is over and with it the traditional battle lines between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Old-style European imperialism has been defeated by the anti-colonial movements of Africa and Asia. Legalized forms of racial subordination, such as segregation in the U.S. and apartheid in South Africa, have been overthrown, leaving Northern Ireland and Israel as the last nations in which racial oppression is official policy. Totalitarianism has been conquered, women are no longer legally excluded from public life in most nations, and queers in the West are rapidly reaching a point in which their rights and choices as queers—including the right to marry—will be recognized by nation-states. And yet human potential is no more realized, the planet is no healthier, and the world is no freer in the early years of the 21st century than they were one hundred years ago. Old oppressions persist, new contradictions have replaced old, and the monster of capital is stronger than ever.

For most of the 20th century, the main conflict was capitalism vs. communism. However oppressive and distorting it was of Marx and Bakunin's ideal, the existence of Soviet communism connected the communist vision with concrete regimes. That connection has disappeared. With the collapse of the Soviet empire, the principal contradiction of the 21st century has become the conflict between liberal capitalism and religious fundamentalism (Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindi). This is not a "clash of civilizations" but a conflict between two different kinds of capitalism, one in which markets rule all, another in which markets are subject to religious dictates. It is a conflict between two visions of empire, one (which currently has the upper hand) in which the master nations create a world of subordinate nations in their political and economic image, another in which a religious empire spreads across nations, conquering those that resist. It is a conflict between two models of human relations, one in which isolated and alienated individuals constantly compete with each other in order to consume, and another in which the individual is

always subordinated to religious authority. It is a conflict in which one power uses armies, laws, foreign policy, and NGOs to dominate, while the other uses religious revivals, suicide bombers, social services, prophets and dictators, and a narrow interpretation of the “word of God.” It is a conflict that exists within nations as well as across them, from the United States to India to Israel to Pakistan.

Liberal democracy has no more patience for true freedom than does fundamentalism. Under it, freedom means simply freedom to buy and sell. It means equal political rights but unequal economic (and therefore real) power. Religious fundamentalism means equality under God but inequality under humanity. Under it, freedom means little more than the freedom to obey. These are but two different hells.

This new conflict has no space set out for a “left” or for anyone who seeks a world without oppression and the domination of capital. It has no room for those who want everyone to have a say in those affairs that affect their daily life.

We must carve that space out.

We are weak but not alone. Many others are also trying to turn the battle for the planet into a three-cornered fight. The Zapatistas began this new struggle for a new era exactly ten years ago. That they still survive is proof that this world is worth fighting for—and can be won. Meanwhile, indigenous peoples worldwide are leading the struggle to develop a third “corner.” In addition to securing Chiapas, they have toppled a regime in Bolivia, elected a left-leaning president in Brazil, and inspired resistance in Ecuador. These examples suggest that the Americas are poised for an indigenous revolution the likes of which we haven’t seen in 500 years.

Another potential force for freedom lies in the new proletariat of the 21st century: young, single women working in the factories and red light districts of Mexico, Uganda, Albania, Thailand, and India. They are murdered in Juarez, gang-raped in Sarajevo, and fired for organizing in Los Angeles, yet they still work. Further, the very qualities that make them attractive to bosses—their youth, their single status, their loosened ties from patriarchal family relations, their “disposability” as laborers—make them potential revolutionaries. What globalization may be exporting above all are its own gravediggers: young angry women with nothing to lose but their chains.

The global economy has also spawned a huge population of what the political theorist Hannah Arendt calls “superfluous peoples,” those with no role in the official economy and who are therefore expendable to the powers that be. These peoples are forced to either wiggle their way into the official economy or, more likely, to make a living at its margins through a combination of above-and-underground activity. The majority of the Black population in the U.S., Palestinians, Romany in Europe, Kurds, and the extreme poor of all nations: these peoples are “disposable” in the global economy. Traditional Marxism calls them the “lumpenproletariat” and sees them as a threat to the class struggle because they are supposedly susceptible to being bought off by the bourgeoisie. But we should consider them as incipient revolutionaries, a part of the worldwide working class with no stake in the system and therefore no reason to wish to see it survive.

Finally, the global economy has caused an explosion of growth of migrant labor. Migrant workers move largely because they have to, not because they want to. In the above-ground economy they do the labor the working class in developed nations no longer want to do, particularly in agriculture, domestic service, and hospitality (hotels, restaurants, etc.). In the underground economy they peddle drugs, pirate goods, and smuggle other migrants. Typically their goals are hardly revolutionary: to support their families, to get a piece of the “American Dream,” to get filthy rich. But in seeking these mundane goals the migrant worker recognizes no border,

flaunts the law, evades the police, and transforms the politics and economics of the countries they left and currently call home. Lacking political power or legal protection, they have an interest in seeking them through both individual means (gaining legal status) and collective struggles such as unionization and social movements for migrant workers' rights. This puts them in the forefront of class struggles in the new century.

These four groups form the potential core of a worldwide struggle against the real "axis of evil": liberal capitalism and fundamentalist capitalism. Only social movements with vision and leadership (most of which must come from within the groups themselves) can win them over. These groups were potentially revolutionary before the 21st century but revolutionaries ignored them. Will revolutionaries learn from the past or repeat the same mistakes? How will BTR fight alongside them?

Left-wing governments in Latin America and Europe claim to represent some of these oppressed groups, but they are ultimately too burdened by the pressure to appease local and international elites to represent a true third alternative (witness President de Silva's recent compromises with capital in Brazil, or the Green Party's capitulations in Germany). Only social movements have this potential. The anti-globalization movement, sparked by Seattle 1999, speaks naturally to some of these groups. The movement against the war in Iraq reflected one of the first attempts by masses of people to say "neither the empire of globalization nor fundamentalism," but the movement petered out in the U.S. and has had difficulty gaining traction in the rest of the world.

One reason why these two movements have had difficulty succeeding in the U.S. is because they have not directly confronted the ghost of white supremacy, which has always haunted American social movements. Neither movement has challenged the cross-class alliance between capital and a sector of the working class that grants privileges to this sector ("the wages of whiteness") in exchange for their role in policing the rest of the working class. The vaunted alliance between unions and sea turtle puppeteers in Seattle, for example, rested on the narrow reformist vision and chauvinism of the unions, who protested in order to preserve privileges won through the cross-class alliance as much as to seek global justice.

The Wal-martization of the American economy reflects the decline of racial privilege and the cross-class alliance. Capital is less and less willing to pay white people more than other workers for the same work and it sees less need for poor whites to police the rest of the poor. Yet even as the white working class sees its job security vanish, its wages decline, its benefits slashed, its work day lengthen, and its opportunities to move up the social ladder (through education or promotion) decline, it continues to cling to the worldview of empire: U.S. domination of the planet, a shriveled social safety net, low wages, low taxes, "customer service," and the privileged status of markets. This group has objective reasons for uniting with the rest of the worldwide working class to struggle for a free world, yet as a group it still prefers racial privilege over class solidarity, even as whiteness provides diminishing returns.

As American revolutionaries, we have several tasks. One is to struggle with those populations already struggling (even if only incipiently) against both capitalism and fundamentalism. Another is to develop a politics, strategy, tactics, and vision that can win a significant chunk of the white working class over to this struggle. A third is to fight to make sure that this struggle, when it develops, struggles against all forms of oppression, including patriarchy and compulsive heterosexuality. In taking on these tasks, we must pay attention to American history as well as to the new challenges and contradictions of the 21st century. Our key questions include the following: How can we expand democracy in an era in which—with the exception of queer

rights—all citizens enjoy equal legal and political rights but in which racial, sexual, and other forms of oppression persist? How can we expand democracy in an era in which political equality is presumed the norm, but so is economic exploitation? How can we ensure the free flow of humans across borders as well as goods? How can we create community out of a plurality of religious and moral beliefs without seeking to enforce arrogant secularism or authoritarian fundamentalism? How can we build a world that is technologically sophisticated yet free of exploitation, weapons of mass destruction, and ecological devastation? How can we build decentralized, directly democratic political spaces without the threat of majority tyranny?

We have so much to do.

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